

Opposition rally solidifies Anwar's democratic credentials

NEW STRAITS TIMES 29 JUL 2025 15-15

THE scene on July 26 was familiar: Malaysia's opposition gathering, banners aloft and voices raised against the sitting prime minister. Yet, beneath the surface, this rally was profoundly different.

Not only did it proceed peacefully — a stark departure from the water cannons and tear gas of past eras — but it culminated in a remarkable paradox: the apparent strengthening of the very man it sought to topple.

Far from striking a decisive blow, the opposition's event may well be remembered as a pivotal moment solidifying Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's democratic credentials and inadvertently boosting Malaysia's global standing.

The absence of brute force that characterised protests during past administrations, and indeed during earlier phases of Malaysia's democratic journey, speaks volumes. The restraint



**DR AHMAD
IBRAHIM**

shown by the police, operating under the current government's directives, was palpable.

This shift from suppression to tolerance is monumental. It signals a maturing democracy where dissent, even large-scale dissent, is managed within the bounds of the law and public order, without resorting to the instruments of state violence.

This is the hallmark of a confident government, secure enough to allow its critics a platform.

The contrast effect was there for all to see. The peaceful nature

of the rally, juxtaposed against memories of past crackdowns, actively enhances Anwar's democratic image.

It allows him to credibly claim, "This is the Malaysia we are building — where you can protest without fear". This resonates powerfully domestically and internationally. The lack of a named successor or unified platform showcased the opposition's fragmentation and strategic incoherence.

It shifted the narrative from "Anwar must go" to "Go? For whom? And to do what?"

This vacuum strengthens Anwar's position as the known, incumbent leader with a defined agenda. Democracy is a selling point. The peaceful rally is good publicity for Malaysia.

Foreign investors crave stability and predictability. Seeing large-scale political dissent managed peacefully demonstrates institutional resilience and adherence to democratic norms.

It signals a country where political risk is managed through dialogue and legal frameworks, not force. Anwar's government can rightly claim this as evidence of democratic progress under his watch.

By allowing the rally to proceed unimpeded, Anwar demonstrated a commitment to the democratic principles he championed for decades as an opposition figure himself.

This grants his government a crucial layer of legitimacy, silencing critics who might paint him as autocratic. He walked the walk.

The irony is delicious: An opposition rally, intended as a show of force to bring down "PMX" instead became a showcase for the robustness of the very democratic system he oversees.

This is not to say Anwar's government is without its challenges or criticism. Economic pressures, questions of governance and legitimate policy disagreements re-

main.

However, the events of July 26 demonstrate that the arena for contesting these issues has fundamentally changed. The rules of engagement are more democratic, more respectful of fundamental rights.

The final winner of the rally? Undeniably, Anwar. He emerges not weakened but strengthened.

The true test now is whether Anwar can leverage this democratic capital to deliver tangible results for the nation, proving that tolerance and effective governance can indeed go hand in hand.

The ball is firmly in his court but the opposition has, for now, handed him an unexpected advantage wrapped in the banner of protest.

The writer is a professor at the Tan Sri Omar Centre for STI Policy IISDS, UCSI University and Associate Fellow, Ungku Aziz Centre for Development Studies, Universiti Malaya